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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that programs for at-risk youth tend to overemphasize student adjustment and the mastery of institutional customs at the expense of instilling learning dispositions that might lead to the postsecondary educational training now required to find adequate adult employment. Programs often focus on drawing students into a more embracing educational environment in the hope of improving student self-esteem and encouraging conformity with school regulations regarding attendance, behavior, and work habits. In this process academic and curricular innovation is often slighted. The aim of many dropout prevention programs tends to be limited to high school graduation and the inculcation of behaviors valued in non-managerial employees. This orientation to education, thought at one time to be practical, is increasingly untenable in an economy where jobs that pay a livable wage go only to those who have some advanced training. It is imperative that programs for at-risk youth prepare their students for the necessity of that training and help them acquire the skills, dispositions, and independence required to seek out and master it. A curriculum more thoughtfully tied into the social and pedagogical practices already present in at-risk programs might facilitate this process. The paper includes two references. (AF)

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Adjustment Before Learning: The Curricular Dilemma in Programs for At-Risk Students

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ADJUSTMENT BEFORE LEARNING:
THE CURRICULAR DILEMMA IN PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

Gregory A. Smith

Programs for at-risk youth have tended to overemphasize student adjustment and the mastery of institutional customs at the expense of instilling learning dispositions that might lead to the post-secondary educational training now required to find adequate adult employment. Programs often focus on drawing students into a more embracing educational environment in the hope of improving student self-esteem and encouraging conformity with school regulations regarding attendance, behavior, and work habits. In this process academic and curricular innovation is often slighted. The aim of many dropout prevention programs tends to be limited to high school graduation and the inculcation of behaviors valued in non-managerial employees. This orientation to education, though at one time practical, is becoming increasingly untenable in an economy where jobs that pay a livable wage go only to those who have some advanced training. It is imperative, then, that programs for at-risk youth prepare their students for the necessity of that training and help them acquire the skills, dispositions, and independence required to seek out and master it. A curriculum more thoughtfully tied into the social and pedagogical practices already present in at-risk programs might facilitate this process.

Programs for potential dropouts are often based on the assumption that their students' academic failure is linked to their inability or unwillingness to interact with school personnel or their age-mates in a

socially or institutionally acceptable manner. It becomes the task of teachers in alternative schools to help them learn the commonly accepted behavioral patterns that many of their peers internalized years before. This view is expressed by a teacher at a program for juniors and seniors in Wisconsin.

> . . . if these kids can't get their acts together, no matter how much factual material we teach them, they're still not going to be successful in life. They've got to improve their self-concept or they're always going to be seeing themselves as being losers and their marriage relationships are also not going to work for them. They have to learn how to get along with other people, which a lot of them haven't been able to do. They have to learn some respect for law and the society; whether they agree with it or not, they have to learn how to function in that society.

To address this apparent gap in their students' background, many at-risk programs emulate the family in an attempt to oversee the "proper" socialization of these young people. Within the context of more informal and intimate settings, students are urged to learn new patterns of social interaction. They are asked to be honest, to consider the needs of others, to accept the consequences of their misbehavior, and to endure the correction of caring adults. Much of this resocialization is well-intended, and there can be no question that acquiring behaviors more likely to result in smooth social interactions will be valuable. Accompanying this resocialization into more widely acceptable forms of interpersonal behavior, students are also asked to master the patterns of behavior demanded by institutions like the school and many workplaces. Such behaviors include promptness, diligence, deference to authority, and a willingness to perform tasks set by others. Adopting such behaviors is often seen by

teachers to be a prerequisite to both academic and occupational success.

This resocialization process with its emphasis on the transmission of institutional customs within an informal and caring social setting is clearly demonstrated by a program for at-risk youth in Indianapolis. There, the metaphors of family and workplace guide the interactions of students and teachers. Regular "family" meetings are held in which students are encouraged to refrain from speaking behind one another's backs and to adopt behavior patterns that reflect the school's nonviolent orientation to conflict resolution. Staff in the program indicate that such behaviors are inappropriate for family members. Beyond this, teachers act as solicitous and watchful parent substitutes; to catch problems before they become crises, they carefully monitor their students' moods and make it a practice to take individuals aside for personal counseling sessions if this is deemed necessary. Such support is in part aimed at dissipating problems that may interfere with academic performance and acceptance of the behavioral expectations of the school. Both guidance and counseling further the goal of student adjustment. The workplace metaphor is given concrete form through customs which mirror those often encountered on shop floors. Students must punch in each day at a clock, complete a set number of curricular packets within a specified time frame, and can be "fired" from the school if they do not fulfill their responsibilities.

The mastery of such customs in fact seems essential if at-risk

youth are to learn how to negotiate the mass institutions that dominate so much of our contemporary social and economic landscape. What happens in many programs for potential dropouts, however, is that this concern about the transmission of socially valued interpersonal and institutional customs overshadows a concern about academic learning. Staff energy is directed towards helping students "get their lives together" but not towards helping them acquire the knowledge and dispositions they may need if they hope to acquire the post-secondary education necessary to gain an economic foothold in the society as a whole.

The curricula in many programs for at-risk youth, for example, tends to be remedial. Courses are frequently simplified versions of required classes found in the conventional program and often involve review of fundamental skills and concepts students have encountered earlier in their educational careers. Such course work is rarely challenging, nor does it elicit much involvement from students. A comment from a teacher in the Wisconsin program mentioned earlier articulates the position on academic learning encountered in many programs for at-risk students.

> You see, it really doesn't make much difference what we're teaching. I'm not a person who feels real strong about subject content because, you know, it's different if you're training a person who you know is going to go out and be a molecular biologist . . . then you can really teach them stuff that's going to help them. A lot of these kids, we have no idea where they're going, what they're going to do. We try to give them the basic skills they're going to need when they're out, but what I teach in science really isn't as important as how I teach it and whether the kids feel that they're getting something out of it.

Though this teacher's concern about how his students respond to

curricular choices is commendable, his assumption that what they need is somehow different from what a future microbiologist will need is problematic. Rather than making curricular choices on a knowledge of future educational requirements, choices in this instance are made on the basis of what material will be immediately interesting and accessible. Such an orientation can contribute to a further devaluing of the usefulness of school knowledge on the part of students.

Few programs, as well, help their students master the habits required for successful academic performance. Students are rarely asked to demonstrate the skills possessed by those who have become independent learners. Homework is a rarity, and work in classrooms often demands little personal initiative or exploration. At-risk youth thus do not learn how to manage their time or motivate themselves to study outside of structured settings. They remain dependent on teachers for their school success and only infrequently demonstrate the ability or willingness to govern their own learning.

This absence of academic engagement on the part of many at-risk students, their failure to become self-disciplined learners, and their frequent refusal to consider post-secondary education means that even though they may graduate from high school, few will seek out or successfully complete the training required for jobs in our increasingly sophisticated and competitive economy. A recent report, **The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth in America** (1988), chronicles the economic plight of the 50 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds who, because they lack post-secondary credentials, are being denied access to

employment that pays a livable wage. Between 1973 and 1986 the real wages paid to this group have declined by 28.3 percent. The situation for dropouts is significantly worse. Their real wages have dropped by 42.1 percent. In comparison, the real wages of college graduates have dropped only 6 percent.

Given the changing economic realities of post-industrialism, it is unlikely that this situation will alter. What this means is that simply graduating from high school is no longer sufficient to guarantee full membership in the nation's economic life. Those who do not acquire the disposition to seek further training are often prevented from successfully participating in the economy. Though programs for potential dropouts improve their students' chances of finding employment, such figures make it clear that helping at-risk youth improve their attendance, get along better with their peers and teachers, and accumulate credits can be seen as only part of these programs' larger task.

It is essential then, that programs for at-risk youth prepare their students for additional training and help them acquire the study skills, dispositions, and independence to seek out and successfully complete such an educational program. If personnel who serve these young people were to create programs that focused on facilitating adjustment, transmitting essential institutional customs, and cultivating a desire to learn within the context of the school, their students might be better prepared to make a successful transition from the classroom to the adult community. In an important sense, programs

for at-risk students need to fulfill exactly the same educational tasks as more conventional schools even though they must often deal with more fundamental personal issues that interfere with their students' ability to thrive within the school.

Achieving this end, however, does not need to mean simply replicating the curriculum offered in traditional high schools. Instead, it may require a rethinking of the way that academic and vocational learning could be placed within the more supportive and informal social context already present in alternative programs. This environment, designed to bring alienated or estranged students into a sense of membership with the school, may also be well-suited for helping students become strong learners, not necessarily in the manner valued in conventional classrooms but in the manner encountered in many out-of-school learning settings. In a recent article, Lauren Resnick (1988) has pointed to the differences between the learning students encounter in schools and the learning they will encounter throughout the remainder of their lives. She has found that an emphasis on the individual acquisition of generalized and symbolic knowledge is unique to schools and may not be transferrable to occupational settings where learning is often a collective task focused on the acquisition of skills and information related to the completion of specific tasks. She argues that for schooling to be both meaningful and economically useful, educators should seek to match more closely the collectively situated and purposeful learning encountered elsewhere in our society.

Because of their emphasis on the creation of a less individuated

and more communal learning setting, as well as their focus on the mastery of more clearly articulated academic and vocational skills, programs for at-risk youth are well-placed to replicate outside-of-school learning patterns. Rather than limiting these program innovations to issues related to behavioral change and the acquisition of appropriate institutional customs, teachers of at-risk youth could potentially make use of their unique social environments to cultivate a collective and purposeful orientation to learning. In this way, students with a history of academic disengagement or disaffection might be drawn not only into a warmer and more supportive educational community; they could also be led to become more involved in the learning process itself.

This has been the experience of students at the Media Academy in Oakland, California. Students in this program are asked to commit themselves to "majoring" in print and electronic journalism for their three years in high school. As sophomores, they are inducted into the tasks and responsibilities that accompany producing two newspapers, one for the school and one for local community, which is predominantly Spanish-speaking. Over their years in the program, students are expected to assume increasingly more demanding leadership roles. Their work is by its nature collective and cooperative, and their finished products are subject to the approval or disapproval of the broader community. What they learn are specific competencies which are immediately transferrable to the assignments they have chosen or been given. The skills and dispositions mastered in this setting are

transparently relevant to media occupations. For students in the Media Academy, learning becomes an immediate and compelling experience.

If teachers in programs for at-risk youth were to assess their curricular offerings from this standpoint, they might be able to overcome the narrower vision that now prevents many of their students from imagining and realizing futures for themselves that require post-secondary training. Instead of providing education in the basics, they could conceive of classes that would help their students not only overcome social "deficits" but also acquire a more positive orientation to the process of learning itself. Such an education would at once be more engaging and compatible with the learning requirements of settings beyond the school. Students with records of academic failure might then learn not only the customs required for life in large institutions, they might also acquire a taste for the kind of collective and socially purposeful learning increasingly required for occupational success.

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